

WASHINGTON, DC – This week, Congressman Joe Sestak (PA-07) met with members of the Disabled American Veterans to discuss his support for legislative efforts to improve the Veterans Administration's programs to better serve their needs.

The 1.2 million-member Disabled American Veterans (DAV) is a non-profit charity dedicated to building better lives for America's disabled veterans and their families. The DAV was founded in 1920 by disabled veterans returning from World War I to represent their unique interests. In 1932, the DAV was congressionally chartered as the official voice of the nation's wartime disabled veterans.

Timothy Dunn of Hanover, Pa., Aaron Montague of Philadelphia, Robert A. Fisher of Norristown, Tim Grossman of Philadelphia, Jeffrey Petherbridge of Philadelphia, and Lawrence Kelly of Beaver Meadows, as representatives of the DAV, specifically highlighted their appreciation for Congressman Sestak's original co-sponsorship of the Veterans Health Care Budget Reform and Transparency Act of 2009, which would help ensure that veterans health care funding is sufficient, timely, and predictable. The VA has received its annual funding for veterans' health care late 19 of the last 22 years. Moreover, over the past seven years, the VA has received its final budget an average of three months after the start of the new fiscal year.

As a result, VA officials don't know the size of their budget in advance, which hinders efficient planning and management. The problem is compounded by the new demands placed on the VA system. Since 2001, the number of VA patients has risen by two million – a 50 percent increase. And our newest generation of veterans has increasingly complex mental and physical healthcare needs that may require a lifetime of care.

The Veterans Health Care Budget Reform and Transparency Act would authorize Congress to approve VA medical care appropriations one year in advance of the start of each fiscal year, which would help end funding delays that have plagued VA when Congress has failed to pass appropriations bills on time. The legislation would also add needed transparency to the process by having the Government Accountability Office (GAO) review and report on the VA budget request.

"Having served as a U.S. Naval officer for 31 years and as the highest-ranking military Veteran ever elected to the U.S. Congress, and as the son of a WWII Veteran, I have no higher priority

than the welfare of those who wore the cloth of this Nation and their families. Identifying their needs and then finding the ways and means to address those needs in a comprehensive and responsible way has been among my highest priorities since assuming office,” the Congressman said at his office on Wednesday.

“First, I made it my mission to personally engage as many of our Veterans as possible. It was very clear to me that with our WWII Vets aging into their 80s and 90s, the Korean War Vets into their 70s, the Vietnam Vets in their 60s and with tens of thousands of casualties from Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom that were not anticipated or planned for, a ‘perfect storm’ had formed that threatened our ability to provide those men and women, and their families, the care they needed and deserved.

“To underscore that point, in 2006 the VA had a casework backlog that approached 600,000. Therefore, outreach was the foundation of my first term. To that end, my district office handled over 1,200 cases for Veterans, active duty service members, reservists, and National Guard members, and I hosted outreach events, including two Veterans Summits (each the largest ever conducted in Delaware County) and a Young Veterans Roundtable.

“I established a “Veterans’ Advisory Group” composed of both Veterans and those who address their needs, meeting quarterly. We have a group of young Veterans we also host quarterly and my District Manager (my U.S. Naval Academy classmate and a retired Navy Captain) helps mentor them through school, job applications and other challenges.

“We hold numerous other Veteran events, such as a forum at Crozer-Chester Medical Center in conjunction with the “Give an Hour” organization which encouraged more than 100 local mental health care professionals to volunteer their services to our National Guardsmen and their families who have begun the largest deployment of the National Guard since World War II.

“These summits were ‘action-oriented.’ They were staffed by problem solvers, caseworkers and decision-makers from my office and as many as three dozen organizations chartered to help Veterans start businesses, continue their education, and receive the disability benefits and medical care due to them. Participants included the Directors of the Philadelphia, Coatesville and Wilmington VA Medical Centers, the Director of the VA Philadelphia Regional Office and Insurance Center, The Widener University Veterans Law Clinic and even the chairman of the U.S. House of Representatives Veterans Affairs Committee, Congressman Bob Filner.

“After hearing from myself, regional VA leaders and Veterans in attendance at my summit at Ridley High School last May, Chairman Filner told me that he wanted to work together to increase funding for Priority 8 Veterans. Priority 8s represent Veterans whose injuries are not service related and whose incomes exceed both the national means test (in 2008, if they had one dependent, \$34,117 annual salary and \$80,000 net worth) and the geographic means test (in 2007 in Delaware County, \$46,150 annual salary if the Veteran had one dependent). Following the summit, Chairman Filner and I both submitted bills to expand the availability of health benefits to Priority 8s. This directly led to the inclusion of \$375 million in the 2009 appropriations bill for Military Construction and Veterans Affairs specifically allotted for Priority 8s, who have been denied vital medical resources by VA protocol since 2003.”

Each case worked and each question taken from a Veteran or their family directly influences Congressman Sestak’s Veterans legislative agenda. Since 2007, the Congressman has personally introduced legislation that:

- Addresses the more than 230,000 Veterans who have been prevented from receiving care through the Veterans Administration (VA) health system by expanding health coverage for Priority 7 and Priority 8 Veterans;
- Mandates mental health care services for our Veterans;
- Increases support for military families with autistic children;
- Requires the Department of Defense to develop a plan to prevent Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder from developing among our military service members;
- Requires the Iraqi government to provide fair restitution to American POWs from the 1991 Gulf War; and
- Establishes the National Casualty Care Research Center which would integrate civilian and military collaboration into combat casualty care research programs, to care for Veterans in the combat zone and at home.

“I have worked with the leadership of Philadelphia and Coatesville Veterans’ Hospitals over the past few months to help address better treatment for cases of home and long-term care. We actually reversed adverse rulings in 13 cases which would have otherwise denied our Veterans and their family caregivers precious hours of weekly treatment,” the Congressman continued.

“I also joined my colleagues in working for and voting for legislation which provides the largest increase in funding for Veterans healthcare in the VA’s 77- year history; creates a new GI bill that fully restores full, four-year college scholarships for Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans, on a par with the educational benefits after World War II; expands small business opportunities for Veterans and helps military reservists keep their businesses afloat during and after deployment; provides at least 20,000 rental vouchers a year for homeless Veterans; and protects Veterans

from foreclosure by extending, from three months to one year, the time a lender must wait before starting foreclosure proceedings.

“My emphasis on Veteran quality of life and care is the reason I received an A+ rating from Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, and my focus on their care will remain a priority during my second term in office, as our men and women in uniform continue to return from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Veterans Administration expects to care for at least 5.8 million patients in the coming year, including 260,000 Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans.

“Please find attached to this note an extended list of the Veteran related legislation I have both personally sponsored and voted for during my time as the Representative of Pennsylvania’s 7th Congressional District.”

Examples of Legislation for Veterans Individually Sponsored by Congressman Sestak

Sponsored H.R. 7167, to reverse a 2003 Bush administration policy which bans more than 235,000 so-called "Priority 8" Veterans from the VA health care system. While Priority 8 Veterans' incomes are deemed too high to qualify for VA health care by the Administration policy, they are often too low for the Veterans to purchase private health insurance. H.R. 7167 increases the eligibility threshold to 200% above the poverty line.

Sponsored an amendment to H.R. 1538, the Wounded Warriors Assistance Act, which will improve mental health care for our wounded soldiers. The amendment would highlight the fact that mental health care is an essential component to the medical services offered to our Veterans and the members of our Armed Services by clarifying that 'medical care' as discussed in HR 1538 includes mental health care services. Incorporated into the final bill, which the House passed on March 28, 2008.

Sponsored an amendment to H.R. 1538, the Wounded Warriors Assistance Act, which would require the Secretary of the Department of Defense to develop a plan to help prevent Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other stress-related psychopathologies (including substance abuse conditions) from developing in our military service members. It would also require the Secretary to submit to Congress a plan for establishing a Peer-Reviewed research

program within the Defense Health Program's research and development function to research the prevention of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and how to best strengthen the psychological resiliency of our military service members. Additionally, it would require the Secretary to develop a system to track the number of notifications made by medical care case managers and service member advocates to health care professionals regarding early warning signs of PTSD and suicidal tendencies in recovering service members assigned to the managers and advocates. Incorporated into the final bill, which the House passed on March 28, 2008.

Initiated an Amendment to H.R. 5658, the Duncan Hunter National Defense Authorization Act, which gives more assistance to military families with autistic children by replacing the monthly cap of \$2,500 for autism services under the ECHO program with an annual maximum of \$36,000, a monthly increase of 20%. Additionally, the amendment contains a demonstration project to identify the needs of military families under TRICARE, along with a provision for a report from the Secretary of Defense on the feasibility of establishing one or more autism support centers. Incorporated into the final bill, which the President signed the bill into law on October 14, 2008 (PL 110-417).

Co-Sponsored H.R. 5167, the Justice for Victims of Torture and Terrorism Act. In 2003, 17 American POWs and 37 members of their family successfully sued Iraq, Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi Intelligence Service for \$653 million in compensatory damages and \$306 million in punitive damages. H.R. 5167 ensures the American service members tortured during the first Gulf War receive their court-adjudicated compensation from Iraq by giving the Iraqi government 90 days to provide restitution. The House passed the bill on September 15, 2008.

Sponsored an Amendment to H.R. 5658, the Duncan Hunter National Defense Authorization Act, which establishes the National Casualty Care Research Center at the US Army Medical Research and Materiel Command (MRMC). The Center will upgrade the MRMC's Combat Casualty Care Research Program and act as both a national center for all combat casualty care research and a center for civilian-military collaboration.

Examples of Legislation for Veterans and Military Personnel Supported by Congressman Sestak

Largest Increase in Veterans' Funding in History. Passed H.R. 2642, FY 2008 Military Construction-Veterans' Affairs Appropriations, which provides the largest increase in Veterans'

funding in the 77-year history of the VA, targeted on ensuring that our Veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan receive the quality health care that they deserve, by a bipartisan vote of 409-2, with 185 Republicans voting YEA. (The Military Construction-Veterans' Affairs Appropriations provisions – providing the largest increase in Veterans' funding in history – were ultimately included in the FY 2008 Omnibus Appropriations bill, PL 110-161.)

New GI Bill. Passed the new GI Bill, as part of Amendment #2 to H.R. 2642, FY 2008 Emergency Supplemental, by a bipartisan vote of 416-12, with 186 Republicans voting YEA. The new GI bill fully restores full, four-year college scholarships for Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans, on a par with the educational benefits after World War II, covering up to the cost of the most expensive in-state public school and also provides transferability of unused education benefits to spouses and children. Incorporated into H.R. 2642, FY 2008 Emergency Supplemental, which the President signed on June 30, 2008 (PL 110-252).

Veterans' Suicide Prevention. Passed the final version of H.R. 327, Joshua Omvig Veterans Suicide Prevention Act, which requires a comprehensive VA program to reduce suicides among Veterans, including suicide prevention counselors at VA medical facilities and 24-hour mental health care for at-risk Veterans, by a unanimous vote of 417-0, with 191 Republicans voting YEA. The President signed the bill on November 5, 2007 (PL 110-110).

Reservist and Veterans' Small Business Programs. Passed the final version of H.R. 4253, Reservist and Veterans Small Business Opportunity Act, which expands small business opportunities for Veterans and helps military reservists keep their businesses afloat during and after deployment, by voice vote. The President signed the bill on February 14, 2008 (PL 110-186).

Veterans' COLA, Effective December 2007. Passed H.R. 1284, Veterans' Compensation Cost-of-Living Adjustment Act, which increases, effective December 1, 2007, the rates of compensation for Veterans with service-connected disabilities and the dependency and indemnity benefits for families of disabled Veterans, by a unanimous vote of 418-0, with 194 Republicans voting YEA. The President signed the bill on November 5, 2007 (PL 110-111).

Disabled Veterans Memorial. Passed H.R. 995, Extending Charter for Disabled Veterans Memorial, which extends the charter for the Disabled Veterans Memorial, which expired on October 31, until 2015, allowing the time to raise the private resources and navigate the approval process to bring this memorial to life on the National Mall, by a unanimous vote of 390-0, with 188 Republicans voting YEA. The President signed the bill on October 25, 2007 (PL 110-106).

Honoring Our Fallen. Passed H.R. 692, Federal Flag Code Amendment Act, which provides that all federal buildings in a state have to comply when the governor orders the American flag lowered to half-staff in honor of soldiers killed while serving, by a bipartisan vote of 408-4, with 183 Republicans voting YEA. The President signed the bill on June 29, 2007 (PL 110-41).

Veterans Substance Abuse. Passed H.R. 5554, Veterans Substance Abuse Treatment Act, which requires the VA to provide the full continuum of care for substance use disorders at every VA medical center, including providing drug screening, detoxification, relapse prevention and counseling for Veterans, by voice vote.

Expanding Housing Assistance for Homeless Veterans. Passed H.R. 3329, Homes for Heroes Act, which requires HUD to provide at least 20,000 rental vouchers a year for homeless Veterans, and creates a new supportive housing program for homeless Veterans at HUD, by a bipartisan vote of 412-9, with 181 Republicans voting YEA.

VA Medical Construction. Passed H.R. 5856, VA Medical Construction, which authorizes \$2.1 billion in FY 2009 for several VA medical facility construction projects, as well as for medical facility leases, by a unanimous vote of 416-0, with 191 Republicans voting YEA.

Veterans Emergency Care. Passed H.R. 3819, Veterans Emergency Care Reimbursement, which requires the Department of Veterans Affairs to reimburse Veterans receiving emergency treatment in non-Department of Veterans Affairs facilities, by a unanimous vote of 412-0, with 187 Republicans voting YEA.

Veterans' COLA, Effective December 2008. Passed H.R. 5826, Veterans' Compensation Cost-of-Living Adjustment Act, which increases, effective December 1, 2008, the rates of compensation for Veterans with service-connected disabilities and the dependency and indemnity benefits for families of disabled Veterans, by a unanimous vote of 417-0, with 195 Republicans voting YEA.

Defense/Troops

First Version of FY 2008 Defense Authorization. Passed the conference report on H.R. 1585,

FY 2008 Defense Authorization, which contained numerous readiness initiatives to strengthen our military, contained the Wounded Warrior Act, and also contained a 3.5% military pay raise, by a bipartisan vote of 370-49, with 188 Republicans voting YEA. The President vetoed the bill on December 28, 2007, over a provision regarding legal claims against the Iraqi government.

Final Version of FY 2008 Defense Authorization. Passed H.R. 4986, the final version of the FY 2008 Defense Authorization, by a bipartisan vote of 369-46, with 187 Republicans voting YEA. This bill is identical to the earlier bill except that it responds to the President's veto by including a revised provision on legal claims against the Iraqi government. Like the earlier version, the bill contains numerous readiness initiatives to strengthen our military, contains the Wounded Warrior Act to improve the care of returning wounded troops, and contains a 3.5% military pay raise. The President signed the bill on January 28, 2008 (PL 110-181).

Wounded Warriors Act. Passed H.R. 1538, Wounded Warrior Act, which responds to the Walter Reed scandal by improving the care of injured soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, by a unanimous vote of 426-0, with 200 Republicans voting YEA. Incorporated into H.R. 4986, FY 2008 Defense Authorization, which the President signed on January 28, 2008 (PL 110-181).

FY 2008 Defense Appropriations. Passed the conference report on H.R. 3222, FY 2008 Defense Appropriations, which includes numerous provisions to strengthen America's military, including investing in improved military readiness; providing the strained National Guard and Reserve with needed equipment; funding a 3.5% military pay raise, larger than the President's; upgrading military health care; and providing more support for military families, by a bipartisan vote of 400-15, with 189 Republicans voting YEA. The conference report also includes a short-term CR, providing continuing funding for government programs and agencies through December 14. The President signed the bill on November 13, 2007 (PL 110-116).

Tax Relief for Military Families and Veterans. Passed H.R. 6081, Heroes Earnings Assistance and Relief Tax Act (HEART Act), which provides \$1.2 billion in targeted tax breaks to military personnel and their families, including tax relief under the Earned Income Tax Credit, clarifies the availability of recovery rebates for military families, and expands homeownership opportunities for Veterans, by a unanimous vote of 403-0, with 184 Republicans voting YEA. The President signed the bill on June 17, 2008 (PL 110-245).

Higher Education Relief for U.S. Troops. Passed H.R. 3625, HEROS Act, which makes

permanent the Secretary of Education's authority to provide U.S. troops called to active duty with higher education relief, including providing them more leeway on repaying their student loans, by voice vote. The President signed the bill on September 30, 2007 (PL 110-93).

FY 2009 Defense Authorization. Passed H.R. 5658, FY 2009 Defense Authorization, which contains numerous provisions to help restore our nation's military readiness; provides additional equipment to protect our troops in harm's way; provides a 3.9% military pay raises; provides a 20% increase in therapy coverage for Veterans' families with autistic children; and contains provisions to reform military contracting; by a bipartisan vote of 384-23, with 181 Republicans voting YEA.

Bonuses for Wounded U.S. Troops. Passed H.R. 3793, Veterans' Guaranteed Bonus Act, which fully addresses the military bonus problems highlighted by the Dole-Shalala Commission – providing essential financial security to our wounded servicemen and women by guaranteeing full payment of bonuses earned and owed to them, by a unanimous vote of 405-0, with 189 Republicans voting YEA.

Debt Relief for National Guard and Reservists. Passed H.R. 4044, National Guard and Reservists Debt Relief Act, which makes it easier for members of the National Guard and Reserves called up for active duty in Iraq or Afghanistan, who are often required to leave small businesses behind and jobs behind at a moment's notice, to file for bankruptcy, by exempting them from the means test requirements of the 2005 Bankruptcy Law, by voice vote.

Born and raised in Delaware County, former 3-star Admiral Joe Sestak served in the Navy for 31 years and now serves as the Representative from the 7th District of Pennsylvania. He led a series of operational commands at sea, including Commander of an aircraft carrier battle group of 30 U.S. and allied ships with over 15,000 sailors and 100 aircraft that conducted operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. After 9/11, Joe was the first Director of "Deep Blue," the Navy's anti-terrorism unit that established strategic and operations policies for the "Global War on Terrorism." He served as President Clinton's Director for Defense Policy at the National Security Council in the White House, and holds a Ph.D. in Political Economy and Government from Harvard University. According to the office of the House Historian, Joe is the highest-ranking former military officer ever elected to the Congress.

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